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ABSTRACT

Similarities and differences between business and the humanities are examined, and steps for improving the job possibilities of humanities students in the business world are proposed. People trained in the humanities will find many of their skills to be highly applicable in business careers. Studying the humanities provides students with a sense of perspective and an appreciation of creativity and helps them develop interpersonal skills and a respect for quality and excellence. But the humanities and business view the world in fundamentally different ways, specifically with regard to the nature of the community, the nature of their intellectual activity, their relationships with time, the nature of their goals and ideals, and the importance of innovation. Students who aspire to business careers must be made aware of the similarities and differences between humanistic and business values. To improve job placement, corporate human resource professionals and college placement counselors must be made aware of the differences between the two disciplines and learn about humanities majors who have successfully managed to apply their skills to the business world. (RM)

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"Humanities and Business: The 'Twain Shall Meet — But How?"

Keynote Address
by

ROGER B. SMITH
Chairman of the Board
GENERAL MOTORS CORPORATION

at the
Conference on The Humanities and Careers in Business

* * *

Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois
May 21, 1984

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"...business and the humanities are, at the same time, more similar and more different than they might appear. They require many of the same skills. Yet they view the world in fundamentally different ways.... And to be aware of the differences is to take the first step in overcoming them."

Roger B. Smith

"Humanities and Business: The Twain Shall Meet — But How?"

It's a real pleasure to be here at this outstanding university–and to have a chance to contribute to your conference.

This is a keynote speech, and the keynote I want to sound this evening is the word *action*. If I sound it loudly and insistently enough, like Joshua at Jericho, maybe the walls between business and the humanities will come tumbling down.

At least I hope they will. They've been crumbling for some time now. The parties on either side have had a good look at each other. And so far, they've seen that there's a lot to be gained from further contact. Tonight, I'd like to help that process along–by sharing with you some of my thoughts, then proposing some actions that I think follow from them.

The basic idea that I would ask you to consider is that business and the humanities are, at the same time, more similar *and* more different than they might appear. They require many of the same skills. Yet they view the world in fundamentally different ways.

Humanistic Values in Business

Sydney Harris has said that "business" is not so much the movement of products as it is

"the relationship between human beings." I agree with Mr. Harris. And I think that there is almost no phase of business life that can be successfully conducted without the benefit of humanistic values and insights.

Last year's conference at Princeton demonstrated that a humanities background is a great advantage. It benefits the career progress of the individual, as well as the corporation in which he or she eventually finds a job. On the other hand, there's no getting around the fact that in the vast majority of business activities, it is technically trained people who do the actual work. That's why we in business must try to do two things at the same time: continue to recruit more people with humanities backgrounds, and make sure that humanistic attitudes and values shape and guide the *way* in which our technical people do their work.

What, then, *are* the values, skills, and ways of thinking that a humanities education can provide? And how do they apply to the conduct of business?

First of all, I would say that studying the humanities gives you *a sense of perspective*. In discussions of corporate management nowadays, we often find the word "stewardship." And with good reason. Certainly, a corporation must serve the interests of its customers, employes, and shareholders. But that alone is not enough. In the cities and towns where its facilities are located, it must also act with a sense of responsibility for the natural environment, for the economic health of the country, and ultimately, for the welfare of future generations.

People who have studied history and philosophy find it easy to maintain such a broad perspective. They know that what a corporation does can have moral implications that may reach far beyond the making of goods and the earning of profits.

The Creative Imagination

The second humanistic value is *an appreciation of creativity*. I'm thinking especially of the ability to see the relations between things that may seem utterly different, and combine them into new arrangements–to connect the seemingly unconnected.

This power is quite familiar to people trained to recognize the recurring elements and the common themes in art, literature, and history. It is also a critical skill in business today–and is in fact becoming more so all the time. Why? Because the only foolproof formula for business success is to realize that there is no foolproof formula for success.

In our industry, for example, new foreign competition, government regulation, wide swings in economic conditions and consumer preference–all these and more have created an environment of rapid and constant change.

To thrive–even to survive–you have to be able to envision new things, as well as new ways of doing old things. You have to know how to extrapolate on the basis of what worked in the past. You have to be able to organize and reorganize your operations to achieve economy and eliminate redundancy. And you need the power to imagine how the course of events might be changed, and by what kind of interventions.

Earlier this year, General Motors announced a massive consolidation of its North American passenger car operations. From preliminary research to final implementation, the project will call upon the creativity of our people. It will require them to employ all of the abilities I just mentioned.

Awareness of Human Dignity

Study of the humanities can also develop *interpersonal skills*. It helps you to become more sensitive to cultural and ethnic differences. At the same time, you grow more aware of the hopes and the dignity that are common to all human beings.

For the effective manager, these skills are nothing less than business fundamentals. A numbers whiz or a genius at production processes isn't much good to us unless he or she can also understand people, treat them with

consideration and courtesy, respect their opinions about the work they do, and appreciate their differences in age, gender, and culture.

Another benefit of humanistic study is *respect for quality and excellence*. On the one hand, consider the humanist who has studied literature, art, and music. On the other hand, the business person dedicated to building products that perform reliably and well ...products with a grace and economy of form that both fits and helps accomplish their function...products that, in every way, give lasting value.

Could these two people have anything in common? Could they enjoy an intellectual and esthetic kinship with each other? Could they in fact be the same person? I think the answer is obvious.

What may not be so obvious to the academic portion of my audience–unless you've been following our advertising campaigns–is that the American auto industry is vitally concerned with quality, excellence, and lasting value. Only by building these into our products can we secure the long-term customer satisfaction that will lead to the more tangible goals of economic growth, profits, and job security.

My last humanistic skill is perhaps the most important of all: *effective communication*. All too few business people understand what it is; all too few practice it in the daily performance of their job.

But students of drama, language, literature, speech, and rhetoric do understand what it is. They learn to arrange their thoughts in logical order, and to write and speak clearly, economically, and unpretentiously. They learn to communicate with a real feeling for the flexibility and power of language and with a sensitivity to their own purposes and to the needs of their audience.

Those are major goals for us, too–because communication is the vehicle for all other forms of business competence. Everything we do depends on the successful transfer of meaning from one person or group to another. In fact, it's not much of an exaggeration to say that communication is really what business is all about!

Transplanting, Not Transferring

I hope I've made it clear that people trained in the humanities will find many of their skills to be highly applicable in business careers. I've tried to identify those skills and to show that they are the very same ones that we are already working to develop in ourselves.

But if I'm going to be truly helpful, I have to be truly realistic. I have to point out that it is not so much a matter of *transferring* the skills I have described as it is a matter of *transplanting* them. Humanities students can certainly see how these skills and values are practiced and applied by their professors. And yet business people and professional humanities scholars live in somewhat different worlds. And to be aware of the differences is to take the first step in overcoming them.

In the next part of my talk, I want to help explain scholars and business people to each other. So if what I say about one group seems obvious to *its* members...well, rest assured that it probably is *not* obvious to the members of the other.

Let's start with the *nature of the community*. It seems to me that the professional scholar's peer group is highly dispersed. It consists of people with similar interests, working in widely scattered institutions. True, there may be a handful of colleagues in the same department, but if it's a small university, or the person is in a narrow sub-specialty, there may not even be that. And academic work is typically not done in a single office, but rather in libraries, at home, and so on.

The business person, on the other hand, lives in a mini-society. He or she spends many hours with the same people, week after week, month after month. Often, he or she has to call upon them for advice, information, or support–or vice-versa.

Living With the Consequences

The upshot of all this is that business people are more strongly obliged to live with the consequences of their words and actions.

One young manager who had come into a corporation from a university teaching job told me how he'd experienced this difference directly. He was offended by another manager's comments on his work, and he responded with a sarcastic, insulting memo. Fortunately, he had a boss who was looking out for him. The boss intercepted the memo, called the angry young man aside, and gently broke the news that "you're going to have to come back and work with this guy next week." The memo was rewritten. And the result was a valuable lesson in diplomacy.

Another difference between business and the humanities lies in the *nature of their intellectual activity.* My understanding is that the scholar typically works alone–reading, thinking, writing, and so on. Of course, there are conferences, symposia, and other types of personal contact between colleagues. But these generally involve people in the same–or nearly the same–discipline.

Basic questions are continually debated. And they don't have to be resolved within any specific time limit. If you can bring someone around to your point of view, that's fine–but it's not critical. And the real-world consequences of other people accepting or rejecting your views are fairly limited. They're confined mainly to the scholarly community itself.

In business, on the other hand, intellectual activity has a lot to do with persuasion and consent. Business people do differ–often vehemently–as to the proper course of action. But before action can be taken, there must be agreement among individuals. And these individuals often come from different disciplines, each with its own orientation, each with its own decision criteria.

I recently saw a cartoon from the *Wall Street Journal.* It shows what are clearly two business executives, sitting in plush chairs, sipping drinks. And one of them says to the other, with obvious indignation, "What I find hard to accept is that there are two sides to every issue."

Well, we're not *all* that rigid! In fact, one of the hallmarks of the competent manager is the ability to tolerate ambiguity. But business decisions must eventually be made, and often in a highly personal way. In fact, as philosophy and analysis are translated into action, the style and effectiveness of individual leadership may be critical. Accountability and responsibility must–ideally–be fixed. And the real-world consequences of a design or a marketing decision are specific indeed: the product may be a smashing success–or a total disaster.

A Question of Time

Another difference between the world of the scholar and that of the business executive is in their *relationship with time.*

Scholars have relatively few and often flexible time limits–the academic calendar, the dates of professional conferences, the publication schedules of journals.

But in business, time is a precious commodity, always in short supply. Our activities are rigidly governed by a full and sometimes merciless schedule of product programs, quarterly financial reports, new-model releases, annual stockholder meetings–not to mention the actions of legislative bodies, regulatory agencies, suppliers, and competitors.

It's no wonder we talk so much about "windows" and "time-frames." And no wonder it's so important that our communications be brief and concise.

The world of the scholar and that of the executive differ in *the nature of goals and ideals.* It seems to me that the humanities scholar makes constant progress towards abstract ideals–truth, good, beauty, and so on. Along the way, he or she gathers evidence as to whether or not the ideal should be changed.

The goals of the manager or executive tend to be more temporary, more provi-

sional–and more pragmatic. But we have to make some decisions as to what they are or we'll never get anywhere!

Of course, we too are constantly redefining our objectives–because competitive strategies must always be formed in the light of social responsibility, human dignity, quality, and other humanistic values that I've discussed.

Focus on Innovation

One last difference that I think it's important to note is *the importance of innovation*. In scholarship, innovation is not a primary goal. It's certainly not sought as an end in itself. And it's balanced with cultivation of and respect for the past.

But business, as management expert Peter Drucker has written, "has only two basic functions–marketing and innovation." Finding better ways to satisfy old needs–and new ways to fulfill new needs–that's why business exists.

This is not to say that the past is irrelevant. Companies are vitally interested in what has made them successful. They want to preserve those qualities and pass them on to their current and future leaders. And they're concerned with the events of their own past as well. Many have even hired historians to research and write corporate histories. But the fact remains: meaningful innovation is among our highest values.

Lowering the Walls

Let me now return to my keynote: action. In the weeks ahead, what actions might follow from the ideas I've presented?

First, I think that we should try to give those students who aspire to business careers the guidance that will allow them to make the most of their humanities training. And that means making sure that they understand the similarities between humanistic and business values, as I've been discussing them.

To accomplish this, colleges and universities could hold mini-conferences, panels, seminars, workshops, or short courses, well publicized and offered to students and faculty alike. The session might be entitled "Humanistic Values in the Business World." And it would have two purposes: first, to help students make the connection between their humanities courses and the humanistic ideals of business practice; and second, to lower those walls–to show professors that they have more in common with business people than they might think.

Action Item #2 has to do with the differences in outlook that I described. Both the corporate human-resource professionals *and* the college placement counselors must become more aware of these differences, so that they can help job applicants to find suitable and rewarding places in business.

Here I think the answer is contact, contact, and more contact–executive visits to campuses, student internships, joint conferences involving the HR people and the placement officers. I'd particularly recommend finding experienced business people–not just top executives, but managers and professionals from the middle ranks–who actually have a humanities background, and inviting them to give talks on campus. That would provide first-hand information on how a humanities person has managed to transplant his or her skills in the manner I've described.

Finally, I'd like each of you to make one contact from the other side of the fence, and plan to see that person in the next few weeks, specifically to implement the ideas that you discuss in the next two days.

I want you to do that because this conference has a larger mission than supporting humanities studies by improving the job possibilities of humanities students, important as that is. That mission is to contribute to better mutual understanding between business and the humanities and, ultimately, to the spread of humanistic values in society at large.

Values Applied

And to do that, you have to be able to see

those values *apart* from their application. The scholar who investigates and defines good writing, let's say, and the manager who uses it...or the philosopher who develops principles of ethics, and the executive who make ethical decisions–couldn't these be examples of individuals whose different work is guided by the same beacon?

One last thought, this one from Charles F. Kettering, who joined General Motors in 1920 and later became the first scientific mastermind of the corporation. The difference between intelligence and education, Kettering said, is this: intelligence will make you a good living.

And what about education? Well, I would answer that what you study is really of secondary importance. Almost 20% of the college graduates we employ at General Motors–over 9,000 people–are liberal arts graduates. They're successful not because they did or did not major in philosophy or French, but because they've had the wit and the resources to absorb what they've been taught and to employ it in an imaginative and creative way.

I thank you again for your invitation. I hope that your conference is productive and stimulating, and that its rewards are felt long after it has ended.